



Ten Workplace Issues that Influence Safety

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Workplace Health and Safety is an issue that many professionals would prefer to leave well alone and leave to someone else. After all, it is just a matter of compliance isn't it? Comply with legislation, comply with internal policies and procedures=safe workplace and management of financial and legal risk. Simple.

Unfortunately not. For an organisation to succeed in implementing its workplace health and safety program, you need to consider the big picture. Here are ten workplace issues which have a vital role in the success of any workplace health and safety program.

1. Job Design

Job design issues such as workload, rostering, shift work, clarity of reporting relationships and direction, supervision, ergonomics, physical and psychological job requirements, autonomy and contact with others have a critical role in the prevention of workplace injury. Physical injuries can be minimised through consideration of ergonomics, repetitiveness and physical exertion of tasks in resourcing planning. An example of this is spreading a physical or psychologically demanding role across multiple employees. Any additional costs associated with this are outweighed by the benefits of avoiding illness and injury, reduction of absenteeism, worker's compensation premium increases and improved employee retention.

2. Organisational Culture

Developing a safety first culture requires moving beyond the pathological and reactive practices of the past (a why bother or let's just not get caught mindset) to a proactive and generative culture of safety. WH&S systems have a key role in facilitating this change, but Senior Management play a key role in driving the culture of an organization away from the pathological and reactive, towards one which is proactive and generative. Leadership, commitment, recognition and reward are essential in developing a culture where working safely is the norm. This is most successful when integrated into the overall organisational strategy.

3. Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment and Selection can assist in the prevention of workplace injury and illness in several ways. Firstly, it is essential that all successful candidates identify with and can demonstrate a commitment to safe work practices. Essentially this is about ensuring the correct cultural fit. Including interview questions on the topic of WH&S, the use of psychometric testing to identify those that are more likely to demonstrate safe behaviour in the workplace, and ensuring new managers have the requisite communications skills are examples of ways employers can address this.

4. Performance Management

Linking WH&S to performance management processes including appraisals, reward and recognition, performance standards and performance recovery, ensures that workplace health and safety is taken seriously by all and that safe work practices are not abandoned in the inevitable focus on meeting other business objectives. The aim here is to show that you are serious about workplace health and safety, which increases desirable workplace behaviour and practices, and ultimately leads to a workplace health and safety program which is integrated into your overall workplace culture.

Addressing the performance of those employees who do not follow safe work procedures must be done in a timely and serious fashion. An escalation process for breaches of safety procedures is generally appropriate, but each breach must be considered in its own right and the outcome determined based on the seriousness of the breach. For instance, a first and final warning might be appropriate for a serious breach of procedure with the potential for catastrophic consequences, e.g. death or serious injury, whilst a more minor breach might be addressed with a discussion and note to file.

Influencing safety behaviour through reward and recognition of those who lead in this area creates a workplace environment where WH&S is viewed positively and as an attribute of a high achieving employee.

5. Induction

Statistics show that new employees are the most likely to be injured, therefore it is essential that safety information specific to a role is provided as early as possible. This can be prior to commencement or immediately upon commencement. This information should include information regarding policies and procedures relevant to the role, and also a practical induction into specific safety equipment, practices or risks that may exist in their new role.

A robust induction record should include evidence that a skills and knowledge assessment has taken place. As WH&S legal obligations extend to visitors, temporary, and contract employees, they should also be included in induction programs. Employees who have changed role, or been away from the workplace for an extended period of time will require refresher training or induction into their new role in order to reduce the risk of workplace injury or illness.

6. Training and Development

Successfully meeting WH&S legal obligations includes ensuring that employees are provided with instruction and training relevant to their role. This may include training on specific policies, procedures, tasks or equipment, and can also include ensuring that employees who are required to, possess the relevant licenses or qualifications. Ensuring that WH&S training occurs in a regular and systematic fashion requires planning and budgeting and coordination with other workplace events and priorities. Including WH&S into a work place training schedule and using a spreadsheet, database or other information system to track employee training information allows overdue training requirements to be identified easily, and for the organisation to provide evidence that legal obligations have been discharged.

7. Absenteeism Management

Absenteeism data can tell you a lot about an organisation, and work units within it. High absenteeism may indicate low job satisfaction, physically or mentally taxing job demands, or conflict between employees

or managers. Each of these issues has the potential to lead to workplace injury or illness if not effectively addressed.

The way that absenteeism is managed in an organisation can also affect WH&S performance.

Having in place clear processes for managing sick calls can assist in identifying work related injury and illness in a timely manner, thus allowing early intervention in terms of treatment and rehabilitation, reducing the length of time off work for that employee. Early return to work for an employee on suitable duties has been shown to reduce the risk of secondary depression following workplace injury, enhance recovery and reduce the costs associated with workplace injury such as workers compensation premiums.

Identifying those employees who are off work with non-work related injuries or illnesses and are likely to require a graduated return to work or suitable duties also has WH&S benefits for employers, by assisting the employer to manage the return to work of these employees in a safe and controlled manner, and thereby reducing the risk of employees sustaining work related exacerbations.

8. Health and Wellbeing

Employee health and wellbeing programs can potentially have the (perhaps unintentional) benefit of reducing workplace injuries and illnesses. Increased awareness of physical and mental health can increase commitment to safe work practices, and safety culture generally. Physical conditioning associated with exercise programs can improve posture, improve work tolerance and strength and assist in relieving workplace stress.

9. Working Conditions and Amenities

Employers are required to provide and maintain a minimal level of facilities for the welfare of workers such as access to first aid and amenities such as clean drinking water and washing facilities.

Employers are also legally required to ensure safe entry and exit to the workplace, adequate space to complete work tasks, adequate lighting and ventilation, comfortable air temperature, access to hygienic dining facilities, storage for personal possessions, change rooms (for employees who are required to change in and out of clothing due to the nature of their work), shower facilities for those who perform dirty, hot or hazardous work and shelter (for those who work outdoors). Where workplace change has the potential to affect these working conditions (for example building works or changes to workplace layout) it is essential that consultation occurs in order to communicate new or temporary arrangement and minimise employee discomfort. The increase in working from home arrangements also creates a requirement for employers to ensure that the home workplace meets the above criteria, is generally safe and comfortable and does not pose an additional risk of injury to the employee.

10. HR Policies and Procedures

HR policies and procedures such as codes of conduct, bullying, harassment, and discrimination, alcohol and drug use, smoking and grievance reporting cross over into the area of OH&S. Breaches of these policies and or procedures have the potential to result in workplace injury and workers compensation claims. Workplace Health and Safety Authorities called in to investigate bullying or harassment complaints now expect that employers have implemented risk management strategies for the prevention of these matters as an employer would for a physical risk such as a trip hazard.